

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-10

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FOR ARA

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, CS, US

SUBJECT: ODUBER LETTER TO LA NACION

REFS: (A) SAN JOSE 3325; (B) STATE 186401

1. DURING CALL ON PRESIDENT ODUBER LATE AFTERNOON AUGUST 6, I EXPRESSED SURPRISE AND CONCERN AT ACCUSATION MADE APPARENTLY AGAINST U.S. DIPLOMATS IN HIS LETTER TO LA NACION AND ASKED FOR FURTHER INFORMATION.

2. ODUBER SAID HIS ACCUSATION WAS NOT DIRECTED AGAINST U.S. AS SUCH, BUT RATHER AGAINST POLITICAL OFFICER PETER JOHNSON, WHO RECENTLY LEFT THIS COUNTRY. ODUBER SAID IT WAS BECAUSE OF HIS STRONG FEELINGS OF FRIENDSHIP FOR THE UNITED STATES AND HIS DESIRE TO MAINTAIN THE BEST POSSIBLE RELATIONS WITH US, THAT HE HAD MADE HIS STATEMENT IN A VAGUE WAY REFERRING TO DIPLOMATS RATHER THAN NAMING NAMES. HE SAID THESE SAME CONSIDERATIONS HAD EARLIER KEPT HIM FROM DECLARING JOHNSON PERSONA NON GRATA AND INSISTING ON HIS IMMEDIATE REMOVAL FROM COSTA RICA. HE HAD TRIED TO AVOID MAKING ANY PUBLIC STATEMENTS ABOUT THIS MATTER, BUT IN VIEW OF THE STRONG ATTACKS TO WHICH HE WAS BEING UNREASONABLY SUBJECTED, AND NOW THAT PETER JOHNSON HAD LEFT THE COUNTRY, HE FELT THAT HE WAS OBLIGED TO DEFEND
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HIMSELF.

3. ODUBER SAID THAT AT THE TIME WHEN THE PRESENT EXTRADITION LAW WAS BEING DISCUSSED IN THE ASSEMBLY, PETER JOHNSON HAD APPROACHED THE ACTING PRESIDENT OF THAT BODY AND HAD THREATENED TO CUT OFF ALL U.S. ASSISTANCE TO COSTA RICA IF THE LAW WERE APPROVED. IT WAS PARTLY IN REACTION TO THIS THREAT THAT THE ASSEMBLY VOTED FOR THE LAW WHICH THE MAJORITY OF THE MEMBERS NORMALLY WOULD NOT HAVE APPROVED. ODUBER ADDED THAT DURING THE SAME PERIOD, JOHNSON ALSO ENGAGED IN SERIOUS POLITICAL ACTION WITHIN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY AGAINST HIS GOVERNMENT. THE PRESIDENT SAID THAT RODOLFO PISA WAS GIVEN A TRIP TO THE U.S. LAST YEAR PRIMARILY SO THAT THE SEC COULD HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY TO BRIEF HIM.

HE STATED FURTHER THAT JOHNNY ECHEVARRIA, ANOTHER OPPOSITION ASSEMBLY DEPUTY WITH WHOM JOHNSON HAD FREQUENT CONTACTS, HAD ARRANGED TO PASS FUNDS TO LA REPUBLICA FOR USE IN A CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE ODUBER GOVERNMENT.

4. I TOLD THE PRESIDENT THAT THESE CHARGES AGAINST A FOREIGN SERVICE OFFICER WERE OF THE MOST SERIOUS KIND, PARTICULARLY SINCE THEY ALLEGED ACTIONS COMPLETELY CONTRARY TO U.S. POLICY AND TO ACCEPTED DIPLOMATIC PRACTICE. I REMINDED HIM THAT IN A PREVIOUS CONVERSATION HE HAD AGREED THAT JOHNSON WAS A VERY ACTIVE, DYNAMIC OFFICER AND THAT HIS EXTENSIVE CONTACTS WITH MEMBERS OF THE ASSEMBLY AND OTHER LEADING COSTA RICANS MIGHT SIMPLY HAVE BEEN A REFLECTION OF EXCESSIVE ZEAL. I EXPLAINED IN DETAIL HOW AND WHY SELECTION OF GRANTEEES ARE MADE, THUS PRECLUDING THE USE OF VISITS FOR THE PURPOSES SUGGESTED.

5. ODUBER ACKNOWLEDGED HAVING SAID THAT JOHNSON'S ACTIONS MAY HAVE BEEN JUST FROM OVERZEALOUSNESS, BUT SAID THAT ON REFLECTION AND FURTHER CHECKING IT WAS CLEAR THAT JOHNSON HAD GONE BEYOND THAT AND HAD WORKED ACTIVELY TO TRY TO GET ACTION ON THE VESCO CASE. HE SAID HE RAISED THIS MATTER WITH ASSISTANT SECRETARY ROGERS BUT DID NOT PRESS IT ANY FURTHER BECAUSE OF HIS COMPLETE CONFIDENCE IN THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY AND THE FACT THAT I HAD ARRIVED AT THE POST. ODUBER SAID THAT HE HAD DOCUMENTS TO BACK UP HIS STATEMENTS

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AND WOULD BE HAPPY TO LET ME SEE THEM. I SAID I WOULD BE INTERESTED IN ANY EVIDENCE HE HAD TO SUBSTANTIATE THE CHARGES. HE SAID HE FULLY UNDERSTOOD THE PURPOSES OF THE GRANTEE PROGRAM AND AGREED WITH IT, BUT FELT THAT IN THIS CASE IT MAY HAVE BEEN MISUSED SINCE JOHNSON EXERCISED GREAT INFLUENCE OVER THE ACTIVITIES OF THE EMBASSY BEFORE MY ARRIVAL, AND UNDOUBTEDLY MANAGED TO GET SOME OF HIS PREFERRED PEOPLE IN.

6. I THANKED ODUBER FOR THE ADDITIONAL INFORMATION AND TOLD HIM THAT AFTER SEEING THE DOCUMENTS TO WHICH HE HAD REFERRED WE WOULD DECIDE WHAT FURTHER ACTION WAS NECESSARY ON OUR PART. I EXPRESSED APPRECIATION THAT HE HAD NOT MADE THE ACCUSATION AGAINST THE U.S. ANY MORE DIRECT. HE SAID HE HOPED NOT TO HAVE TO SAY ANY MORE PUBLICLY AND THAT IF PRESSED, HE WOULD SIMPLY SAY THE REFERENCE WAS TO SOMEONE WHO IS NO LONGER HERE.

7. HE TOLD ME OF THE MEETING WHICH THE ACTING DEAN AND SECRETARY OF THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS HAD WITH VICE MINISTER ROMAN, IN ABSENCE OF FOREIGN MINISTER FACIO, EARLIER THAT DAY DURING WHICH THEY HAD INFORMALLY EXPRESSED CONCERN OVER WHAT COULD BE MISINTERPRETED AS ATTACK ON DIPLOMATS IN GENERAL. ROMAN HAD ASSURED THEM THAT NO SUCH ATTACK WAS INTENDED, AND HAD PROMISED TO TAKE THE MATTER UP WITH ODUBER. ODUBER SAID HE HAD TOLD ROMAN TO ADVISE THE OTHERS TO JUST RELAX.

8. I ASKED THE PRESIDENT WHAT DID HE THINK WERE THE PROSPECTS FOR THE VESCO LAW BEING AMENDED. HE ASSURED ME THAT HE WANTS TO HAVE THE LAW AMENDED AND WANTS TO HAVE VESCO EXTRADITED FROM THIS COUNTRY. HE SAID HE IS WAITING PRIMARILY FOR THE U.S. GOVERNMENT COMMENTS ON WHAT AMENDMENTS NEED TO BE MADE. HE SAID HE FELT THAT AS LONG AS VESCO REMAINED HERE HE WOULD CREATE SERIOUS PROBLEMS FOR THE COUNTRY AND FOR ANY GOVERNMENT. VESCO GETS HIMSELF DEEPLY INVOLVED IN POLITICS AND DEALS WITH THE OPPOSITION MEMBERS AS WELL AS THE GOVERNMENT. THE COUNTRY CANNOT BE AT EASE, THEREFORE, AS LONG AS VESCO REMAINS HERE. ODUBER ASSURED ME THAT HE HAD INFORMED ALL TOP MEMBERS OF HIS ADMINISTRATION THAT THEY WERE NOT TO HAVE ANY BUSINESS DEALINGS WITH VESCO OR ENGAGE IN ANY ACTIVITIES ON A

COMPROMISING NATURE.
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9. WITH REFERENCE TO THE QUESTIONS RAISED IN THE DEPARTMENT'S TELEGRAM (WHICH ARRIVED AFTER MY MEETING WITH ODUBER), I HAVE NO REASON TO BELIEVE THAT ODUBER'S REMARKS WERE IN ANY WAY CONNECTED WITH THE UMANA VISIT. THIS WAS BORNE OUT PARTICULARLY BY HIS COMMENT THAT HE IS AWAITING COMMENTS FROM THE U.S. GOVERNMENT ON WHAT AMENDMENTS NEED TO BE MADE TO THE EXTRADITION LAW. ALSO, I DOUBT GREATLY THAT THERE WAS ANY VESCO INPUT INTO THE ODUBER LETTER. AS DEPARTMENT AWARE, ODUBER HAS BEEN SEETHING FOR SOME TIME OVER EFFECTIVENESS OF JOHNSON IN REACHING MEMBERS OF THE OPPOSITION, AND HAS BEEN PARTICULARLY STUNG BY THE VARIOUS CHARGES, MANY OF WHICH APPEAR TO HAVE FIRM BASIS IN FACT. I SUSPECT HE MAY JUST HAVE DECIDED THAT SINCE JOHNSON IS NO LONGER HERE TO DEFEND HIMSELF, THIS WAS AN EASY WAY TO

SHIFT THE BLAME FOR THE GOVERNMENT'S ACTIONS OR LACK THEREOF
ON THE VESCO MATTER.

10. IN FOLLOW-UP EDITORIAL REPLYING TO DUBER'S SPEECH,
LA NACION HAS ACCUSED THE PRESIDENT OF VAGUENESS AND HAS
BEEN PRESSING HIM FOR SPECIFICS ON THE DIPLOMATS INVOLVED
IN THIS ACTION. THE BEST WE CAN HOPE FOR IN THIS CASE IS
THAT IF ODUBER DOES REPLY, HE WILL COUCH HIS ANSWER IN
TERMS OF "DIPLOMATS WHO ARE NO LONGER IN THIS COUNTRY."
THAT MAY GET THIS PARTICULAR ISSUE OUT OF THE WAY.

11. MEANWHILE, BELIEVE IT BEST FOR US TO CONTINUE TO DO
EVERYTHING TO ACCEPT DOUBER'S INVITATION THAT WE INFORM HIM
OF CHANGES WE THINK ARE NECESSARY IN EXTRADITION LAW.
WHETHER OR NOT HE FOLLOWS THROUGH WITH ANY ACTION TO AMEND
THE LAW ACCORDING TO LINES WE BELIEVE NECESSARY, HE WOULD
BE HARD PRESSED TO ACCUSE US OF INTERFERRING SINCE HE KNOWS
THAT THIS WAS DONE AT HIS INVITATION AND WITH HIS FULL COOPERATION.
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